On Seferis' 'Helen'

KATERINA KRIKOS-DAVIS

To Harry

'Helen', a poem based on an ancient legend, belongs to Seferis' collection *Log Book III*; written in 1953, it was published in 1955.[1] Although it has been repeatedly dealt with by critics[2] there is still room for further discussion. In the present article, after a brief survey of the ancient Greek tradition of the legend that Seferis employed, the following aspects will be considered: the poem's structure, borrowings from relevant ancient Greek sources, the blending of ancient Greek myths with elements drawn from later Greek culture, how Seferis portrays his heroes, the poem's relationship to the Cypriot political situation of the 1950s, and, finally, the ideas expressed in the poem.

1. For Seferis' poetry, the following two editions have been used: George Seferis, Ποιήματα (Athens, 1972), and *Collected Poems 1924–1955*, tr. E. Keeley and P. Sherrard (London, 1973). In referring to verses, I have kept the numbering of the Greek edition. Apart from cases where it was essential to quote from the original, all quotations are in translation.

2. See: A. Karandonis, Ὁ ποιητὴς Γιῶργος Σεφέρης, 4th ed. (Athens, 1976), pp. 172–4, 189–94; G. P. Savidis, Μιὰ περιδιάβαση, in Γιὰ τὸν Σεφέρη (Athens, 1961), pp. 311–12, 340–7. Some treatment of the poem will also be found in P. D. Mastrodimitris, Ἡ ἀρχαία παράδοσις εἰς τὴν ποίησιν τοῦ Σεφέρη (Athens, 1964), pp. 18–22; L. Politis, *A History of Modern Greek Literature* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 234–5; M. Dimakis, Ἡ ποίηση τοῦ Σεφέρη (Athens, 1974), p. 69; K. Bastias, Σταμάτησε ἡ καρδιὰ τοῦ Σεφέρη ἀλλὰ ἐπιβιώνει τὸ ἔργο του, Στήλη Α΄ (Athens, 1972), pp. 95–6; D. Yakos, Τ ἀηδόνια δέ σ' ἀφήνουνε νὰ κοιμηθῆς στὶς Πλάτρες, Στήλη Β΄ (Athens, 1972), pp. 36–8; S. Zannetos, Σεφέρης καὶ Κύπρος, Στήλη Β΄, p. 44; M. B. Raizis, 'The poetic manner of George Seferis', *Folia Neohellenica*, II (Amsterdam, 1977), 105–26.

57

Alongside the orthodox legend according to which Helen's elopement with Paris was the cause of the Trojan War, another story has existed since the sixth century B.C. This developed from Stesichorus' famous 'Palinode'.[3] Tradition has it that Stesichorus was struck blind by Helen because he spoke ill of her in one of his poems. He recovered his sight only when he composed a second poem, the 'Palinode', a recantation of the first. In the fragment of the 'Palinode' that has been transmitted to us through Plato, he denies that Helen ever went to Troy.[4] Moreover, Plato's reference to τὸ τῆς Ἑλένης εἴδωλον ὑπὸ τῶν ἐν Τροίᾳ Στησίχορός φησι γενέσθαι περιμάχητον ἀγνοίᾳ τοῦ ἀληθοῦς[5] suggests that in the 'Palinode' Stesichorus must have also introduced the idea that instead of Helen her phantom image sailed with Paris to Troy. It was this phantom, then, that the Trojan War was fought over, according to the Stesichorean legend, which thus differs significantly from the Homeric one.

In his *Electra*, Euripides made use of this legend; later, in 412 B.C., he based his tragedy *Helen* on it.[6] Briefly, the plot of this play is as follows: A phantom image of Helen followed Paris to Troy while Helen herself was carried by Hermes to the palace of Proteus, king of Egypt, where, as the play opens, she waits for the end of the Trojan War. Theoclymenus, now king of Egypt after the death of his father Proteus, tries to force her into marrying him. Helen goes and resides by the tomb of Proteus, from whom she seeks protection. Teucer arrives in Egypt and tells her that Troy fell some years ago and that Menelaus is

3. For references to the Stesichorean legend, which coexisted with, but certainly did not overshadow, the Homeric account of the Trojan War, see: Pl. *Phdr.* 243a, *R.*9.586c. Isoc. 218bis. D. Chr. *11th Discourse* 40–2. Lucianus *V. H₂*.15. Suid. *Στησίχορος*. Hor. *Epod.* 17.38.

4. See: Pl. *Phdr.* 243a.

5. See: Pl. *R.* 9.586c. The fact that Plato used the Stesichorean legend to illustrate his argument that the unreal pleasures are only εἴδωλα of the true ones shows that he refers to a well known story.

6. A discussion as to whether Euripides' play is a tragedy or not would go beyond the scope of this article. For different views on the matter see: H. C. Baldry, *The Greek Tragic Theatre* (London, 1974), pp. 96–7; A. M. Dale, *Euripides' Helen* (Oxford, 1967); H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* repr. (Norfolk, 1973), pp. 311–29. P. Vellacott, *Ironic Drama* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 127ff. On the whole, I accept Dale's theory that, in the ancient Greek sense, the play is a tragedy.

probably dead. While she is lamenting with the chorus of Spartan women, Menelaus, who has been shipwrecked on a nearby coast, appears on the scene. He has left the phantasmal Helen in a cave under the protection of his men, and has come to the palace to ask for help. He meets Helen, who tells him her story, but he remains confused by the existence of the two Helens and unpersuaded until an old servant of his comes to announce that the Helen they had with them has disappeared into thin air after revealing the truth. Assisted by the priestess Theonoe, Theoclymenus' sister, Helen manages to fool Theoclymenus by presenting Menelaus as a soldier who brought her the news of her husband's death. Pretending that they want to perform a funeral ceremony at sea, Menelaus and Helen escape from Egypt on a ship that Theoclymenus has given them for the ceremony. At the end of the play, the Dioscuri appear *ex machina* and put an end to Theoclymenus' wrath against Theonoe.

When Menelaus' old servant meets his master and Helen, hearing that the gods had cheated them with a νεφέλης ἄγαλμα (705), he asks: νεφέλης ἄρ' ἄλλως εἴχομεν πόνους πέρι; (707) Euripides does not elaborate on this point any further; nevertheless, it appears to have been a source of inspiration for Seferis' 'Helen'. With his feeling for things tragic,[7] the modern poet chose to use the servant's question as the third part of the epigraph of his poem, which is, by and large, an elaboration of this question and of all the tragic implications it involves. The epigraph's first part, also drawn from Euripides' *Helen* (148–50), is a reference to Teucer's fate after the end of the Trojan War.[8] In Seferis' poem, Teucer is the sole first-person narrator and it is he, and not Menelaus or the servant, as in the Euripidean tragedy, who finds out from Helen that through deception, the Trojan War was fought for the sake of a νεφέλη.

II   *The poem's structure*

Chronologically, the poem is set after Teucer's arrival in Cyprus, which postdates the Trojan War and his encounter with

7. The best account on this point is to be found in: I. Tsatsou, Ὁ ἀδερφός μου Γιῶργος Σεφέρης (Athens, 1973), pp. 68–70.

8. Another quotation from the same play (E. *Hel.* 582) serves as the second part of the epigraph.

59

Helen in Egypt. In the peaceful atmosphere of the island, away from the upheaval of the war with its consequences, and away from Egypt, where he discovered the futility of his suffering, Teucer listens to the nightingales. Their song, which brings to him memories from the past, induces him to recollect his painful experiences. Thus, the hero tells his story.

The opening line, 'The nightingales won't let you sleep in Platres', is repeated twice in the course of the poem and serves as a refrain. It can be viewed as the poem's choral part, especially as it is placed in inverted commas. Much of the unified effect of the poem depends upon the frequent return of the nightingale theme. The latter is, in fact, essential to the structure of the poem, since each time Teucer addresses the nightingale he introduces a new subject until, gradually, his identity, story, feelings and thoughts take shape. On this basis, the poem can be viewed as being thematically divided into three parts: (a) Teucer talks about his experience as regards both men and gods, reveals his identity and personal story and, in v. 8, hints, for the first time, at his meeting with Helen. (b) He recalls his encounter with Helen in Egypt, talks of the incredible truth she told him and of the bitter realization that, through being deceived, the Greeks and Trojans warred over a phantom. He stresses the human suffering and ends by putting the following questions, drawn from the Euripidean *Helen* (1137), to the nightingale: 'What is a god? What is not a god? And what is there in between them?' (c) Teucer, by fully universalizing his personal story, implies that tragedies similar to his own are likely to recur among future generations of men.

III   *Borrowings from ancient Greek sources*

Seferis' extensive awareness of the past and his knowledge of ancient Greek literature are clearly suggested in 'Helen'. Not only does he base his poem on Euripides' *Helen* and use three quotations from it as his epigraph, but he also alludes to this play, as well as to the other relevant ancient Greek texts, by quoting words and sometimes entire verses from them; moreover, there are other words and verses which, though not identical to ancient Greek ones, certainly recall them. All this indicates that in all probability Seferis had these ancient sources in mind – which is hardly surprising since he happened to meet

60

T. S. Eliot's requirement that a poet should write 'with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order'.[9] A list of these words and verses in Seferis' 'Helen', with those corresponding to them in ancient Greek texts, is given in the Appendix.

IV *Blending of ancient and modern elements*

Given Seferis' familiarity with Greek antiquity, the reference to Platres, first occurring in the opening line of 'Helen', may at first sight appear odd in the context of the poem. Platres, the contemporary Cypriot summer resort, is not, to my knowledge, mentioned in the ancient Greek sources; thus, there can have been no connection between it and Teucer. Yet, even if the opening line is viewed as choral and not personal in its emphasis, Teucer's link with Platres is made explicit in v. 10 when he asks: 'Platres: where is Platres?' This reference to Platres in connection with Teucer should be viewed as one of these subtle anachronisms, not uncommon in Seferis' poetry, for which an evident parallel can be found in the poem 'Upon a Foreign Verse', where Odysseus' hands 'knew how to judge the carving of the mermaid at the prow' (23). By associating the ancient Teucer with a contemporary place and by acquainting the Homeric Odysseus with a much later practice, Seferis removes them, to some extent, from their historical reality. The device of distancing particular characters or events from the immediate reality of their times invests them with atemporality and universality. Moreover, the association of Teucer or Odysseus with elements drawn from the rest of Greek tradition is probably a subtle attempt to point to the continuity of Greek culture. This would explain why, when dealing with one period in Greek history, Seferis introduces elements taken from other periods. Thus in a poem like 'Helen', which is based on an ancient legend, he brings in connotations of Greek Orthodoxy by his allusion to a fresco in a church at Asinou in Cyprus (v. 44), and introduces a strong folk element by means of the fine fifteen-syllable opening line which, as already mentioned, is

9. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *Selected Essays* (London, 1944), p. 14.

61

repeated twice in the course of the poem and serves as a refrain. Similarly, in the poem 'Upon a Foreign Verse' he compares Odysseus with the old sailors of Asia Minor who, when Seferis was a child, used to recite to him the seventeenth-century Cretan poem *Erotokritos*.

V   *Portrayal of heroes*

In the portrayal of his heroes Seferis has departed significantly from the ancient Greek sources. As in Homer and Euripides, Helen is again a woman of radiant beauty. But whereas Homer presents her as a lonely figure hating her beauty and faced with problems, and Euripides as a gentle and particularly clever, if not cunning, woman, in Seferis she is simply the undeserving victim who protests. Indeed, a fuller portrayal of Helen was not essential to the development of the narration.

Teucer, on the other hand, is a much more fully developed character, tailored to Seferis' own nature and tastes. Teucer is a modest man. Thus, whereas he boasts in the *Iliad* (8.293–9) about his skill as an archer, and in Euripides refers to his εὔστοχον πτερὸν (*Hel.* 76), in this poem the best archer of the Trojan War (*Il.* 13.313–14) talks of his excellent skill as if there was nothing exceptional about it: 'I too was an archer in the war' (21). This modest statement is not unlike Seferis' Εἶμαι ἕνας Ἕλληνας μέσης μορφώσεως.[10] Moreover, the hero's attitude towards the inevitable can be paralleled with that of Seferis. In the second part of the poem, Teucer relates that when he met Helen in Egypt she revealed to him that the Trojan War was not fought for her but over her phantom image. Faced with this new reality which cannot be altered, he appears to realize that he must resign himself to it. He does not allow himself to lament over it. Referring to the phantom, the unworthy cause of all their troubles, Teucer limits himself to just a brief and, superficially at least, serene statement: 'The gods wanted it so' (39). Though one can feel an internal struggle implicit in this

10. G. Seferis, Δοκιμές, 3rd ed., I (Athens, 1974), p. 274. Regarding Teucer's modest statement Ἤμουν κι ἐγὼ στὸν πόλεμο τοξότης· / τὸ ριζικό μου, ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου ποὺ ξαστόχησε (21–22), one might add that the use of the verb ξαστόχησε (lit. missed his target; metaph. failed) instead of ἀπέτυχε, apart from conveying equally well the essential meaning of failure, allows the best archer in the Trojan War a note of bitter self-sarcasm.

statement, nowhere is there a word about this struggle that preceded and still underlies his acceptance of the inevitable.

This same attitude towards the inevitable is to be found elsewhere in Seferis, whose natural reserve prevents him from lamenting (*Οἱ περιγραφὲς τοῦ ἑαυτοῦ μου μ' ἐνοχλοῦν*, he once wrote),[11] and is best illustrated, perhaps, by the last stanza of 'Denial':

> With what spirit, what heart,
> what desire and passion
> we lived our life: a mistake!
> So we changed our life.

'A mistake' implies the recognition of the reality, and 'so we changed our life' resignation to the inevitable. The new life, suggested by the last line of this stanza, is the one forced on the 'we' of the poem; it is an unpleasant one since presumably it is without spirit, heart, desire, and passion. Nevertheless, here too there is a complete lack of lamentation. Leaving aside any value judgement, it is their respective attitudes towards the inevitable that seems to be one of the main differences between Seferis and T. S. Eliot, at least the T. S. Eliot of *The Waste Land*. Faced with the reality, Eliot appears to be paralysed: he sinks into mournful depression and laments. Seferis avoids any lamentation; he limits himself to a brief statement and gives the impression that, despite the existence of the painful reality, he continues to operate as best he can.

To return to Teucer: His monologue takes place after his arrival in Cyprus, where he finds himself deprived of everything. 'I moored alone with this fable' (56), he says. His brother is dead; he himself has been faced with the revelation that, having succumbed to deception, he had fought at Troy not for a valid reason but for an illusion; more painful still, having been banished to Cyprus, he has been forced to leave his native island.[12] Thinking back to the Trojan War, he describes the

11. G. Seferis, *Μέρες Γ'*. 16 *Ἀπρίλη* 1934–14 *Δεκέμβρη* 1940 (Athens, 1977), p. 241.

12. The motif of man deprived of everything is not uncommon in Seferis' poetry. See *Ὁ κ. Στράτης Θαλασσινὸς περιγράφει ἔναν ἄνθρωπο*, in *Τετράδιο γυμνασμάτων*, particularly the description of man's adulthood (vv. 19–26), and *Ὁ ἄνθρωπος ποὺ τοῦ ἔκλεψαν τὸν ἴσκιο*, in *Τετράσιο γυμνασμάτων B'*.

63

human suffering in the most vivid colours. Unlike the Euripidean Teucer who, when Helen pities the Trojans, is quick to point to the Greek suffering,[13] Seferis' hero shows sympathy for both Greeks and Trojans. In v. 40 he appears to feel for Paris, who had also been deceived and 'lay with a shadow as though it were a solid being'; and when he says 'for ten whole years we slaughtered each other for Helen' (44), he seems to speak in general without differentiating between Trojans and Greeks. By the end of the poem, this feeling for humanity is further intensified; differences between friend and foe are quite transcended, and both are universalized and elevated into human types as Teucer wonders whether 'in future years some other Teucer / or some Ajax or Priam or Hecuba, / or someone unknown and nameless' (60–2) will not also be fated to suffer through deception.

We saw that Seferis departed from the ancient Greek sources in portraying Helen and Teucer, and that he modelled the latter according to his own tastes and nature. Teucer, here, is very much a Teucer–Seferis. This was natural since it was through Teucer that Seferis chose to express himself and expound his own thoughts. Before dealing with these thoughts, the poem's relationship to the Cypriot struggle for independence in the 1950s must be examined.

VI *Relation to Cyprus*

'Helen' is one of the poems in *Log Book III*, a collection written in Cyprus and dedicated to it.[14] Cyprus in the wide sense, as the common denominator of all these poems, gives a thematic unity to the collection. *Log Book III* includes poems about the past and present of the island, its landscape and people, as well as a few which, though having no apparent connection with Cyprus, were written there.

In three poems of the collection there are references to the Cypriot political situation of the 1950s: Στὰ Περίχωρα τῆς Κερύνειας relates to the social life of the British during this period. In the same poem, Seferis manages to show, very subtly,

13. See: E. *Hel.* 109–10.
14. The original title of this collection was not *Log Book III* but a quotation drawn from Euripides (*Hel.* 148): . . . Κύπρον, οὖ μ' ἐθέσπισεν . . . (Athens, 1955).

64

how alien they are to Cyprus. In Νεόφυτος ὁ ῾Εγκλειστος Μιλᾶ the Shakespearean verse – Καλῶς μᾶς ἤρθατε στὴν Κύπρο, ἀρχόντοι. Τράγοι καὶ μαϊμοῦδες (12) – also seems to be a reference to the British, especially since, according to G. Savidis (op. cit., p. 385), it alludes to the posters that the British Tourist Office published with the statement: 'You are welcome, sir, to Cyprus . . . SHAKESPEARE'.[15] In 'Salamis in Cyprus', one of his most powerful poems, Seferis expresses, allusively perhaps but unmistakably, his anguish about the struggle of the island. Appealing to the 'friends from the other war' (35) and recalling the ideals they all fought for, he expresses his grief that these ideals have not been realized. Yet, some hope about the future emerges by the end of the poem.

In 'Helen', however, there is no such reference either to the Cypriot struggle or to any political or other issue of our time – at least not in the text itself (as opposed to the poet's own footnote). Nevertheless, it appears that Seferis' disillusionment, which manifests itself particularly by the end of the poem, originated in his feelings about the striving of the Cypriots to rid themselves of British rule. This assumption is based on the following external evidence:

'Helen' was written in Cyprus in 1953, a time when the Cypriot struggle had already started. Seferis' attachment to Cyprus, and his concern about the Cypriot struggle are well known facts. With regard to the latter, he has confessed: ῞Οσο γιὰ μένα, ἄρχισα νὰ νιώθω τὴν ἀποξένωση ἀπὸ τὰ ἑλλαδικὰ κομματικὰ ἀρκετὰ νωρίς ἀπὸ τὸ τέλος τοῦ κινήματος τοῦ' 35. ῾Υπογραμμίζω τὴ λέξη: κομματικά. ᾽Απὸ τότε, μόνο σὲ δύο γεγονότα τῆς ἱστορίας μας δόθηκα ὁλόκληρος, ψυχὴ καὶ σῶμα: στὸν περασμένο πόλεμο καὶ στὸ θέμα τῆς Κύπρου. Καὶ στὰ δυὸ εἶδα μεγάλα ξυπνήματα καὶ τρύγησα κάμποσες πικρὲς ἐμπειρίες.[16] Moreover, the poet himself, in a footnote to the last verse of 'Helen', writes: ᾽Φίλος ποὺ διάβασε τὸ χειρόγραφό μου θυμήθηκε τοῦτο: "In those days the official recruiting posters in Cyprus said: Fight for Greece and Liberty" (House of Commons,

15. Othello, IV.i.269. Στὰ περίχωρα τῆς Κερύνειας and Νεόφυτος ὁ ῾Εγκλειστος Μιλᾶ are not included in the Keeley–Sherrard edition of Seferis' poetry.
16. Δοκιμές, II, p. 303. See also R. Roufos, Βραδιὰ Σεφέρη (Athens, 1972), p. 58.

65

Official Report, 5 May 1955)'.[17] And indeed, the disillusionment that the last verses of the poem convey corresponds to the general mood current in the 1950s in Greece. There was then a wide-spread, if not universal, feeling that the Greeks and Greek Cypriots who fought in World War II for freedom, democratic ideals and the right of self-determination had been betrayed, since the Cypriots were denied this very right. Viewed in this light, 'Helen' applies only too well to the Cypriot struggle, the unrealized ideals of World War II being now regarded as another *phantom*. This interpretation of the poem was plausibly suggested by A. Karandonis as early as 1956. Yet, it would seem wrong to claim with him that the poem solely expresses τὴν ἀπογοήτευση, τὴν ὀδύνη τῶν Ἑλλήνων, τὸ βαθύ τους ἀνθρώπινο καὶ φυλετικὸ παράπονο γιὰ τὸ ξεγέλασμά τους ἀπὸ παλαιοὺς φίλους καὶ συμμάχους, ἀπὸ τοὺς συντρόφους στὸν παγκόσμιο ἀγώνα γιὰ τὴν ἐλευθερία, γιὰ τὴν ἀνθρωπιά, γιὰ τὴν αὐτοδιάθεση τῶν λαῶν.[18] It must be admitted that the disillusionment expressed in the poem is not particularized, as it is in 'Salamis in Cyprus'. On the contrary, though originating in a particular political situation, the poem touches on fundamental questions in life and is universal in its implications.

VII   *Ideas expressed in the poem*

Because of Teucer's exile, the themes of πατρίδα and ξενιτειά, often dealt with by Seferis,[19] occur and recur in 'Helen':

> Shy nightingale . . .
> you who bestow the forest's musical coolness
> on the parted bodies, on the souls
> of those who know they will not return. (2–5)

and

> on sea-kissed Cyprus
> consecrated to remind me of my country,
> I moored alone with this fable. (54–6)

17. *Ποιήματα*, p. 338. Savidis explains that 'In those days' refers to World War II.

18. Karandonis, op. cit., p. 189. See also p. 174.

19. See: 'Westward the Sea Merges' (*Mythistorema*, no. 7), 'Letter to Mathios Paschalis', 'Upon a Foreign Verse', 'A Word for the Summer', 'The Return of the Exile', 'Last Stop', 'Details on Cyprus'.

'I've lived my life hearing names I've never heard before: /
new countries' (11–12) says Teucer, implying that life is full of
surprises. That these surprises are often unpleasant ones is
suggested by what follows: 'new idiocies of men / or of the gods'
(12–13).

Fate, a recurring theme in Seferis,[20] is also present here.
Teucer defines his own fate as 'that of a man who missed his
target' (22) and wonders whether 'it is true that . . . someone
unknown and nameless . . . isn't fated to hear' (59–64); he
suggests that fate is beyond human control by saying that his fate
'brought' him to Cyprus (16). This idea was first touched on by
Seferis as early as 1924. In the following verses from 'Fog' we
hear that ἀλλιῶς ἡ μοίρα τὸ βουλήθη:

> ῎Α! νά ᾽ταν ἡ ζωή μας ἴσια
> πῶς θὰ τὴν παίρναμε κατόπι
> μ᾽ ἀλλιῶς ἡ μοίρα τὸ βουλήθη
> πρέπει νὰ στρίψεις σὲ μιὰ κόχη.
>
> Καὶ ποιά εἶν᾽ ἡ κόχη; Ποιὸς τὴν ζέρει; (25–9)

As the movement of the moon suggests the passing of time,
the idea that time changes everything also occurs in 'Helen'
when the hero says:

> The moon
> rose from the sea like Aphrodite
> covered the Archer's stars, now moves to find
> the heart of Scorpio,[21] and changes everything (16–19)

Living in a world where life is full of unpleasant surprises,
where human fate is fickle and beyond the control of the

20. See: 'Fog', 'Erotikos Logos', 'Mycenae', 'Fires of St. John', 'The Shape
of Fate', 'Actors, Middle East', 'Last Stop'. In 'Helen', by means of the verb
κυματίζω (13), Teucer stresses the fickleness of human fate.

21. Seferis was particularly attracted by Scorpio. In 1944 he wrote. Προτοῦ
κοιμηθῶ, στὸ κατάστρωμα. Οὐρανὸς μὲ πλῆθος ἄστρα καὶ πάντα ὁ
μεγαλοπρεπέστατος Σκορπιὸς μὲ τὴ βυσσινιὰ καρδιά του, τὸν Ἀντάρη: Cor
Scorpionis. Αὐτὸς ὁ ἀστερισμὸς μὲ παρακολουθεῖ (ἢ τὸν παρακολουθῶ) ἀπὸ τὴ
Νότιο Ἀφρική. Θά ᾽πρεπε νὰ γράψω κάτι μὲ τίτλο: Κάτω ἀπὸ τὸν ἀστερισμὸ τοῦ
Σκορπιοῦ. See Μέρες Δ᾽. 1 Γενάρη 1941–31 Δεκ. 1944 (Athens, 1977), p. 354.

67

individual, where time changes everything, Teucer, and through him the poet, asks: 'Truth, where's the truth?' (20) This tragic question is going to be coupled, later in the poem, with three others which are drawn, as noted earlier, from Euripides:

> what is a god? What is not a god? And what
> is there in between them? (52)

Since they stand here on their own, these questions are more powerful in Seferis' poem than in the Euripidean *Helen*, where they are followed by a piece of didacticism. Questions like these, conveying 'existentialist agony', as L. Politis has put it,[22] abound in Seferis' poetry. 'The King of Asine', verse 29 from 'Fog', already quoted, and the following verses from 'The Shape of Fate' (19, 22) are only a few examples:

> How did we happen to fall, my friend, into the
> pit of fear?
> . . . .
> who is he who commands and murders behind our backs?

Apart from touching on these perennial questions in the course of the poem, Seferis handles the particular myth in such a way that he manages to relate it to human affairs in general.

It was suggested earlier that Seferis' Teucer is an atemporal hero. This is implied both by his association with a contemporary Cypriot summer resort, which removes him from his Homeric reality, and by his character, which is quite different from that portrayed by either Homer or Euripides. As he is the protagonist and narrative voice of the poem, his atemporality alone would have been sufficient to give 'Helen' a certain universality. Moreover, by using indefinite pronouns and articles in connection with the Homeric heroes referred to in the poem and also the river Scamander and the phantom of Helen, Seferis elevates everything from the sphere of the particular to that of the universal.[23] This universality is made still clearer by the phrase 'in future years':

22. *A History of Modern Greek Literature* (Oxford, 1973), p. 235.

23. In the cases of κάποιος ἄλλος Τεῦκρος (60), κάποιος Αἴαντας ἢ Πρίαμος ἢ Ἑκάβη (61), the indefinite pronoun elevates Homeric heroes to universal

68

> . . . if it is true
> that in future years some other Teucer,
> or some Ajax or Priam or Hecuba . . . (59–61)

In this way, the above mythological characters are made to represent not simply the heroes of the *Iliad* or even types of men peculiar to a particular era, but human types belonging equally to the past, present and future. Similarly, the phantom Helen and the river Scamander are made to symbolize concepts valid both in ancient times and in the years to come.

Teucer, Ajax, Priam and Hecuba become the Teucers, Ajaxes, Priams and Hecubas of this world: the people who, through deception, suffered, mourned, saw their lives being destroyed, fought and were killed for the sake of an illusion. They also become those who, again through deception, are suffering now, or will suffer in the future, lured by another illusion. The phantom of Helen symbolizes this illusion and the river Scamander symbolizes the battlefields where purposeless suffering and slaughter take place. Teucer shows this suffering to be still more universal by applying it to yet another human type, not represented by the ones he has already mentioned – 'someone unknown and nameless who nevertheless saw / a Scamander overflow with corpses' (62–3). In the same symbolical language, the gods seem to stand for those forces – whether fate, or 'those with power', or 'he who commands and murders behind our backs',[24] or δυνάμεις ποὺ μᾶς ὀρέγονται[25] –

---

human types. Similarly, the indefinite article is used to convert the river Scamander in v. 63 into a universal symbol. The same is true of the phantom of Helen, for the reference to Helen in verses 50 and 68 clearly alludes to her phantom image since it is placed in apposition to those 'airy nothings' – more specifically, 'a linen undulation, a bit of cloud, / a butterfly's flicker, a swan's down / an empty tunic' (48–50) – that stand for the εἴδωλο. Here too, the indefinite article applied to the phantom of Helen makes it a symbol.

24. The quotations are from 'Salamis in Cyprus' (52) and 'The Shape of Fate' (22), respectively.

25. *Μέρες Δ'*, p. 138. Elaborating on the good and evil effects these forces have on men, Seferis continues: Αὐτὲς οἱ ἀνεξήγητες δυνάμεις ποὺ δὲν εἶναι οἱ δικές μας, ποὺ μᾶς παραμονεύουν μέσα ἀπὸ τὸν ὕπνο μας, μέσα ἀπὸ τοὺς τοίχους τῶν σπιτιῶν μας, μέσα ἀπὸ τὰ καθημερινὰ σκεύη· ποὺ μᾶς ἀγαποῦν, μᾶς πολεμοῦν, μᾶς βασανίζουν – εἶναι δικές σου, Θεέ μου, ἢ τί νος εἶναι.

which, being beyond the control of the ordinary individual, are responsible for his being deceived.

The poem achieves universal relevance, for it applies to any suffering or strife – whether national or personal – undertaken, through beguilement, for what in the end will prove to be an illusion. Viewed in this light, Seferis' 'Helen' should be seen as dealing with a human failing: man's capacity for deception with all the consequences it involves. Teucer's own story shows that this failing has already occurred and his scepticism suggests that it will not be avoided in the future. For his 'ifs', by the end of the poem, imply his strong doubts about the possibility that men will refrain from fighting and suffering once again for what will eventually turn out to be a phantom. Thus, the tragic tone inherent in a poem dealing with Teucer's story reaches its climax by the last twelve verses, which portend similar tragedies in the future. It is difficult to see any hope emerging by the end of the poem, contrary to what A. Karandonis asserts: *Τὸ ποίημα αὐτό . . . φωτίζεται μολαταῦτα μὲ τὴν ἀμυδρὴν ἐλπίδα μήπως οἱ σύγχρονοι Τεῦκροι δὲν ξανακούσουν πιὰ πὼς 'τόσος πόνος τόση ζωὴ πήγαν στὴν ἄβυσσο γιὰ ἕνα πουκάμισο ἀδειανό . . .'.*[26] But surely, 'the contemporary Teucers who will not hear again that so much suffering, so much life went into the abyss, all for an empty tunic' are beyond the scope of the poem, which clearly deals only with those who have become, or will become, victims of deception. For them there is no hope.

To conclude, the origin of the scepticism and disillusionment apparent in the poem can be traced to Seferis' feelings about the Cypriot struggle of the 1950s in relation to World War II; yet his poetic embodiment of them is such that they relate not just to the Cypriot struggle but to human vicissitudes in general. As a vehicle for conveying his meaning, he makes use of the Stesichorean legend of Helen. Rarely, and only when his needs absolutely dictate it, does he depart from the ancient, particularly the Euripidean, tradition of this legend. Yet – and this makes his poem more arresting still – he shows the story in a different perspective, shifting the emphasis from the plot of the gods and the total misjudgement of the heroes who fought in the Trojan war, which Euripides stresses, to the human tragedy of deception. His poem, then, is atemporal, philosophical in its

26 Karandonis, op. cit., p. 193.

70

scope, and proves once more that, if treated creatively, the ancient myths abound in universal implications. It deals with fundamental questions in life such as fate, the nature of truth, and the changing of things by time, but primarily with the human capacity for being deceived and all the futile suffering that this involves.

University of Birmingham

APPENDIX

Seferis' 'Helen' and the ancient Greek texts

(When no particular scholar is mentioned, the borrowings listed below have not, to my knowledge, been noted before.)

I. G. Savidis (op. cit., pp. 340–1) suggests that Seferis' Ἀηδόνι ντροπαλὸ (2), Ἀηδόνι ποιητάρη (23), and Δακρυσμένο Πουλὶ (54) refer to Euripides'

> σὲ τὰν ἀοιδοτάταν ὄρνιθα μελῳδὸν
> ἀηδόνα δακρυόεσσαν
> (E. *Hel.* 1109–10)

In my opinion, Seferis' borrowing goes beyond this; vv. 2–3 in his 'Helen' and 1107–10 in Euripides' choral part can be paralleled:

> Ἀηδόνι ντροπαλό, μὲς στὸν ἀνασασμὸ τῶν φύλλων,
> σὺ ποὺ δωρίζεις τῇ μουσικῇ δροσιὰ τοῦ δάσους
> (2–3)
>
> cf. σὲ τὰν ἐναύλοις ὑπὸ δενδροκόμοις
> μουσεῖα καὶ θάκους ἐνίζουσαν ἀναβοάσω,
> σὲ τὰν ἀοιδοτάταν ὄρνιθα μελῳδὸν
> ἀηδόνα δακρυόεσσαν.
> (E. *Hel.* 1107–10)

Moreover, it is possible that directly, or indirectly through

71

Euripides, a Homeric influence can be traced in the above quotations from Seferis' poem:

> ὡς δ' ὅτε Πανδαρέου κούρη, χλωρηῒς ἀηδών,
> καλὸν ἀείδῃσιν ἔαρος νέον ἱσταμένοιο,
> δενδρέων ἐν πετάλοισι καθεζομένη πυκινοῖσιν,
> ἥ τε θαμὰ τρωπῶσα χέει πολυηχέα φωνήν,
> παῖδ' ὀλοφυρομένη . . .
>
> (*Od.* 19.518–522)

II. *Σκλάβα* in v. 8, referring to Helen, calls to mind the Euripidean: *δούλη καθέστηκ' οὖσ' ἐλευθέρων ἄπο* (E. *Hel.* 275).

III. *καινούργιες τρέλες τῶν ἀνθρώπων* (12). Euripides, referring to men who fight, calls them *ἄφρονες* (E. *Hel.* 1151).

IV. *Αὐτὴ ποὺ κυνηγούσαμε χρόνια στὸ Σκάμαντρο* (27).

> cf.   . . . ὁ δ' ἄθλιος πόσις
> στράτευμ' ἀθροίσας τὰς ἐμὰς ἀναρπαγὰς
> θηρᾷ πορευθεὶς 'Ιλίου πυργώματα.
>
> (E. *Hel.* 49–51)

The choice, in the same context, of the verbs *θηρᾷ* and *κυνηγούσαμε* by Euripides and Seferis, respectively, is significant.

> V.   *Δὲν εἶν' ἀλήθεια, δὲν εἶν' ἀλήθεια· φώναζε*
> *'Δὲν μπῆκα στὸ γαλαζόπλωρο καράβι*
> *Ποτὲ δὲν πάτησα τὴν ἀντρειωμένη Τροία'*
> (29–30)

As G. Savidis points out (op. cit., p. 345), the source of this statement by Helen must be the part of Stesichorus' 'Palinode' that has been transmitted to us through Plato:

> οὐκ ἔστ' ἔτυμος λόγος οὗτος
> οὐδ' ἔβας ἐν νηυσὶν εὐσέλμοις, οὐδ' ἵκεο Πέργαμα Τροίας
> (Pl. *Phdr.* 243a)

VI. *Τίποτε στὴν Τροία – ἕνα εἴδωλο* (38)
References to the *εἴδωλο* abound in the Euripidean *Helen*; see E. *Hel.* 34, 582, 683, 1136 and also: E. *El.* 1283.

72

VII. Ἔτσι τὸ θέλαν οἱ θεοὶ (39)

The closest parallel to this verse is to be found in the speech of the Dioscuri:

> ἀλλ' ἧσσον' ἧμεν τοῦ πεπρωμένου θ' ἅμα
> καὶ τῶν θεῶν, οἷς ταῦτ' ἔδοξεν ὧδ' ἔχειν.
> (E. *Hel.* 1660–1661)

Other parallels referring to the intervention by the gods are as follows: E. *Hel.* 31–7, 119, 261, 584, and 704, as well as the two (E. *Hel.* 610 and 930–1) that Savidis suggests (op. cit., p. 341).

VIII. Κι ὁ Πάρης μ' ἔναν ἴσκιο πλάγιαζε σὰ νά ἦταν
πλάσμα ἀτόφιο (40).

This verse can be compared with:

> (a) Ἥρα δὲ . . . .
> ἐξηνέμωσε τἄμ' Ἀλεξάνδρῳ λέχη,
> δίδωσι δ' οὐκ ἔμ' αλλ' ὁμοίωσασ' ἐμοὶ
> εἴδωλον ἔμπνουν οὐρανοῦ ξυνθεῖσ' ἄπο,
> Πριάμου τυράννου παιδί· καὶ δοκεῖ μ' ἔχειν –
> κενὴν δόκησιν, οὐκ ἔχων. . . .
> (E. *Hel.* 31–6)

and

> (b) . . . τοὺς Ἀλεξάνδρου γάμους
> . . . ψευδονυμφεύτους. . . .
> (E. *Hel.* 882–3)

Savidis (op. cit., p. 346) compares this verse with 'Trattando l'ombre come cosa salda' (Dante, *Purgatorio*, XXI, 136.) For a more detailed discussion on the point see: M. Peri, '*Μνῆμες Dante*', in *Memoria di Seferis* (Florence, 1976) pp. 124–6.

IX. κι ἐμεῖς σφαζόμασταν γιὰ τὴν Ἑλένη δέκα χρόνια (41).

This verse brings to mind the Homeric formula:

> Ἀργείην Ἑλένην, ἧς εἵνεκα πολλοὶ Ἀχαιῶν
> ἐν Τροίῃ ἀπόλοντο . . .
> (*Il.* 2. 161–2)

73

The same formula is repeated in: Hom. *Il.* 2. 177–8.

X. τόσες ψυχὲς
     δοσμένες στὶς μυλόπετρες, σὰν τὸ σιτάρι (45–6).

The reference to ψυχὲς in this context vaguely recalls the Euripidean verses:

ψυχαὶ δὲ πολλαὶ δι' ἔμ' ἐπὶ Σκαμανδρίοις
ῥοαῖσιν ἔθανον·

(E. *Hel.* 52–3)

XI. . . . γιὰ μιὰ νεφέλη (48).

It is noteworthy that Seferis uses the Euripidean word νεφέλη, rather than the more common σύννεφο, to indicate the phantom of Helen. Cf. E. *Hel.* 705, 707, 1219.

XII. . . . τὸ πούπουλο ἑνὸς κύκνου (49).

G. Savidis (op. cit., p. 341) compares this with:

. . . ὅτε σ' ἐτέκετο ματρόθεν
χιονόχρως κύκνου πτερῷ.

(E. *Hel.* 214–15)

I think that Seferis may also have had in mind the passage below:

. . . διὰ τὸ τᾶς
ὀρνιθόγονον ὄμμα κυκνόπτερον
καλλοσύνας, Λήδας σκύμνου, δυσελένας,

(E. *Or.* 1385–7)

XIII. γιὰ ἕνα πουκάμισο ἀδειανὸ (50 and 68) is reminiscent of verses 584 and 590 in Euripides, where Helen explains to Menelaus that her phantom image was made by:

αἰθήρ, ὅθεν σὺ θεοπόνητ' ἔχεις λέχη

(E. *Hel.* 584)

and refers to the phantom as:

. . . κεν[ὰ] . . λέχη

(E. *Hel.* 590)

74

XIV. τ' εἶναι θεός; τί μὴ θεός; καὶ τί τ' ἀνάμεσό τους; (51)
As G. Savidis suggests (op. cit., p. 341), the reference here is to:

> ὅτι θεὸς ἢ μὴ θεὸς ἢ τὸ μέσον
> (E. *Hel.* 1137)

XV. . . . στὴν Κύπρο τὴ θαλασσοφίλητη
    ποὺ ἔταξαν γιὰ νὰ μοῦ θυμίζει τὴν πατρίδα (54–5).

These verses contain obvious echoes of:

> ἐς γῆν ἐναλίαν Κύπρον, οὗ μ' ἐθέσπισεν
> οἰκεῖν Ἀπόλλων, ὄνομα νησιωτικὸν
> Σαλαμῖνα θέμενον τῆς ἐκεῖ χάριν πάτρας.
> (E. *Hel.* 148–50)

XVI. τὸν παλιὸ δόλο τῶν θεῶν (59)
The following verses from Euripides also point to this deceit of
the gods:

> ὅστις . . .
> πρὸς θεῶν κακοῦται . . .
> (E. *Hel.* 267–8)

> . . . πρὸς θεῶν δ' ἦμεν ἠπατημένοι.
> (E. *Hel.* 704)

XVII. Lastly, Scamander overflowing with corpses (v. 63) and
the rivers swelling blood in their silt (v. 47) bring to mind the
Homeric descriptions:

> πολλοὶ γὰρ τεθνᾶσι κάρη κομόωντες Ἀχαιοί,
> τῶν νῦν αἷμα κελαινὸν ἐΰρροον ἀμφὶ Σκάμανδρον
> ἐσκέδασ' ὀξὺς Ἄρης, . . .
>
> (*Il.* 7.328–30)

> ὄχθας πὰρ ποταμοῖο Σκαμάνδρου, τῇ ῥα μάλιστα
> ἀνδρῶν πῖπτε κάρηνα . . .
> (*Il.* 11.499–500)

75

Ῥῆσός θ᾽ Ἑπτάπορός τε Κάρησός τε Ῥοδίος τε
Γρήνικός τε καὶ Αἴσηπος δῖός τε Σκάμανδρος
καὶ Σιμόεις, ὅθι πολλὰ βοάγρια καὶ τρυφάλειαι
κάππεσον ἐν κονίῃσι καὶ ἡμιθέων γένος ἀνδρῶν.
(Il. 12.20–3)

. . . ὁ δ᾽ ἄρα πρηνὴς ἐπὶ γαίῃ
κεῖτο ταθείς, ἐκ δ᾽ αἷμα μέλαν ῥέε, δεῦε δὲ γαῖαν.
τὸν δ᾽ Ἀχιλεὺς ποταμόνδε λαβὼν ποδὸς ἧκε φέρεσθαι,
καί οἱ ἐπευχόμενος ἔπεα πτερόεντ᾽ ἀγόρευεν·
   Ἐνταυθοῖ νῦν κεῖσο μετ᾽ ἰχθύσιν, οἵ σ᾽ ὠτειλὴν
αἷμ᾽ ἀπολιχμήσονται ἀκηδέες· οὐδέ σε μήτηρ
ἐνθεμένη λεχέεσσι γοήσεται, ἀλλὰ Σκάμανδρος
οἴσει δινήεις εἴσω ἁλὸς εὐρέα κόλπον.
(Il. 21.118–25)

76